DBQ Prompt: Analyze the development of tensions between modern attitudes and traditional values during the Roaring Twenties.

Sample Student Essay

The Roaring Twenties was a time of innovation in American life; however, increased immigration, racial conflict, differing theological views, as well as women striving for independence caused tension between conservative and liberal society.

During the 1920s economic opportunities and the attraction of American life pulled immigrants to the United States. Just as during earlier times in American history the citizens of the U.S. responded to the immigration with nativist ideas. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 as well as the Immigration Act of 1924 diminished the amount of immigrants, especially from Southern and Eastern parts of Europe. This class in the cultures of the Americans and the Immigrants was due in large part to the Red Scare during the 1920s. When the Bolshevik Revolution took place in 1917, and Russia became a Communist country, the people of the United States feared that immigrants coming to America would bring with them the Socialist ideas of their countries. This caused a resurgence of nativism, exemplified with the rising of the Ku Klux Klan back into American life.

At the time of the Roaring Twenties, black people began to change their view points from having a desire to be white, to being proud that they were Black. The Harlem Renaissance played a major role in the development of Black pride during the 1920s. “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” by Langston Hughes (doc 4) is an example of how blacks were becoming proud of their race rather than viewing it as a burden. A major example of this new Black pride in African American Culture is the rise of jazz music to popularity in America. This was unique from any other American music genre, mirroring the fact that African Americans were viewing themselves as a unique part of American Culture. Due to this cultural movement within the black community, racial tensions between blacks and whites increased. Along with race riots, the resurgence of the KKK was also used to quell the Black pride. “The Klan’s Fight for Americanism” (Doc 3) is written during this time to call for support from white Protestants to return American to the way it used to be. The KKK’s actions in hurting Black pride is similar to the way that the KKK’s had oppressed blacks earlier during the Reconstruction through things such as the Jim Crowe laws.

Tensions over immigrants and between the racial classes are not the only cultural differences during the 1920s. The doctrinal differences between those advocating the teaching of Evolution and those defending Christianity was another major conflict during the Roaring Twenties. The Scopes Monkey Trial as depicted in “The World’s Most Famous Trial Tennessee Evolution Case” (Doc 2) held captive the attention of all in the country. All wanted to know what would happen and if Evolution would be allowed to be taught in the schools. Another theological dispute was over the way the Gospel was being preached. Old sermons were preached talking about an Angry God and fire and brimstone while new sermons were about God’s Love and a beautiful, perfect heaven. “Aimee Rises from the Sea” (Doc 7) illustrates how the elder people viewed this new style of preaching. It was similar to the way that the Old Lights looked down on the Great Awakening versus the New Lights.

One of the most important conflicts in culture during the Roaring Twenties was the way that women were fighting for their independence. After the 19th amendment was passed that gave women the right to vote. With the right to vote in hand women continued to try and change the perception men had of them; Flappers were women who dressed and acted in ways that were perceived as provocative at the time. Women fought for their right to be individuals, and this can be seen by a marriage and divorce graph (Doc 6) that showed that the ratio of divorce to marriage increased during the twenties. These women were met in opposition by the women and men who believed in the cult of domesticity and that women belonged in the home. The Women’s Christian Temperance Movement fought against the Flappers by trying to discourage them from smoking as seen in “Women Smokers” (Doc 5). The WCTU fought the Flappers by discouraging the actions that made them different. The battle between the Flappers and the WCTU is similar to the fight that the WCTU had against men arguing for the right to vote.

American culture during the Roaring Twenties was largely based on consumerism and new inventions. “Babbitt” by Sinclair Lewis (Doc 1) gives an example of how the U.S. culture changed from Faith to Commercial production and consumerism. Inventions such as household electronic appliances, the assembly lines, and the cheap price of cars made American life focus around what they could buy. However, during this time these conflicts discussed previously such as women fighting for individualism, new theological ideas, racial conflict, and immigration caused tension between different groups during this time.